

# COVID-19 School Meal Service Best Practices for Nutrition Administrators



In the past year, school nutrition programs have continued to safely serve meals and meet the needs of students during the COVID-19 pandemic with the help of USDA program waivers. Nebraska Appleeed recently conducted interviews with state and district-level school nutrition administrators from Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska to hear their lessons learned and best practices for program adaptation and waiver implementation. Below is a summary of these best practices:

## State Communication with USDA

Regional USDA offices support school nutrition programs year-round but are critical partners for putting COVID-19 waivers into action in states. State administrators should connect directly with leadership in these offices to clarify new flexibilities, provide feedback, advocate, and coordinate with other states as they adapt to changes in their programming.

## State Administrator Communication with Districts

It is crucial that local school districts and state departments of education maintain timely, multi-channel, and consistent lines of communication between one another. Many states have accomplished this by creating periodic meetings to provide updates, offer technical assistance, encourage peer-to-peer learning, and provide support for new nutrition directors and program participants. One-on-one meetings, newsletters, emails, social media, webpages, webinars, and videos support this goal as well.

## Increasing Meal Participation

Many school districts have increased participation at remote distribution sites by offering evening distributions and including as many meals as possible at each pickup. Bus route deliveries or mobile distribution have also proven valuable. Working families, remote learners, and families without transportation all benefit from remote distribution.

Increasing participation with in-person learners has proven difficult. Even as meals distributed are free to all participants through the Summer Food Service Program, districts have struggled to reach pre-pandemic participation. Communication from the district, school, parent organization, and classroom level have supported some increases but many families still seem to prefer sending their children with home-packed food.

**“When more kids eat, there are fewer behavioral problems, visits to the nurse’s office, tardies, and absences in schools.”**



These are just a few of the best practices and lessons learned from our research. For more information see our full report and recommendations at [neappleseed.org/summerfood](https://neappleseed.org/summerfood).



## Technology

Technology can play a role in the multi-channel communication strategies states use with nutrition directors and districts use with students and families. Websites like Padlet.com can allow nutrition directors to share best practices with one another virtually. Smartsheets can enable quickly editable documents that clarify information about state and federal waivers to make them easier to use by local districts. Overall, technology is critical to reaching areas and individuals near and far during the pandemic.

## Contingency Planning

Planning for shutdowns, staff quarantines, model changes, and other contingencies makes dealing with challenges in the moment more manageable. State administrators and local districts should create or use contingency planning guidance to ensure meal service can continue despite circumstances so that students receive meals and staff remain as protected as they can be.

## Community Partnerships

Relationships with local and national nonprofits or community organizations can be leveraged to help states and districts reach more students. Making use of these largely aligned and willing groups can support overall meal continuity and participation through creating outreach materials, collecting and distributing financial resources, and reaching populations that are tougher to reach.

## Managing Fatigue

Staffing remains one of the biggest challenges for districts around the country, and with COVID-19 stretching the limits of existing school nutrition personnel, it can be hard for staff to find a moment to breathe. Acknowledging the importance of the work and pushing to maintain service is critical but finding ways to take time off and rest will help staff cope with the added stress and workload of our new normal.

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